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MATERIAL MEMORIES ETHNOGRAPHY

Women's Purposeful Use of Popular
Culture Anachronisms in Quasi-
Communal Retirement

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This is a study of elder women now living single in retirement and the strategies the women create to survive in this new cultural setting. Retirement-complex living in the emerging American elder care market calls for devising individual occupation strategies to adapt to the previously unknown lifeway in which the retirees form a family community matrix. Lacking cultural precedent, traditional old ways, anachronisms vanishing from the mainstream of popular culture, provide a means for the women to create and use personal bridging strategies in "living happy." Included are scripted and solipsistic rituals that provide self-appraisal of one's health status through immediate experience. The author discovered that living out these old ways in the present has surprising health-giving outcomes because of the attendant purposeful occupation and social interactions old ways compel from elder women within this emergent household form.

My purpose in this article was to identify strategies elder women employed to adapt to, and live successfully in, quasi-communal retirement within a college campus-like setting in the urban Southwestern United States. What I discovered were *old ways*, anachronisms of a past popular culture, employed by elders in this emergent household form.¹ I uncovered a corporation's use of old ways, initially as part of a marketing strategy, in targeting upper-class elder Americans to purchase private apartment accommodations in which some activities occur in the company of fellow residents. Living out these old ways in the present, the elder women interweave them into the emergent retirement community culture in which they have come to live. That the outcome contributes to health maintenance might be a serendipitous result of this marketing strategy that advertises elders joining with one another in living a vacation lifestyle, including dining daily in a restaurant-like setting. I observed that the interweaving of popular culture anachronisms provides familiar and comfortable means for purposeful occupation and for creative development of social alliances when the fanciful idea of "continuous vacationing" fails, as a practical reality, for these elder women.

I begin by defining descriptors and terms constructed as shorthand in identifying the elements observed throughout the remainder of the article. Old ways are prior ways of doing things familiar to the elder women participants that are not in vogue today: ironing cotton sheets, making the bed with four folded corners (not fitted sheets), removing casual clothing worn that day and dressing up for dinner, using a bar of soap

and a tube of toothpaste (not dispensers), participating in formal afternoon teas, and more. The term *quasi-communal* signals that although residents have individual apartments, some daily activities are completed in the company of a limited and known group of other elder persons living on the same campus. *Configurative culture* identifies the development of culture within the campus area and its community of elders as emergent culture calling for sociocultural means that are not being transmitted or passed down from one generation to the next. *Interweaving* designates the employing of old (cultural) ways within new kinds of cultural settings and social means that are emergent. *Emergent* indicates evolving in the present such as the extended family form of the center where individuals living in their own apartments complete some tasks of the day and the week in the company of fellow elder apartment dwellers. *Singular rituals* are scripted and solipsistic ways-of-doing performed by one person and repeated over time to provide health status information to the individual performer through the immediate physical experience of the ritual performance. *Secondary memorialization* is the employment of objects as stand-ins for the deceased or others not physically present in one's life context. Finally, *material memories* are memories related to one's past that are called to mind or given physical representation through material culture as personally constructed or preexisting. These terms are illustrated here to aid the reader because there is no single discipline whose theory adequately explains all of the observations in this ethnography of elder women "living happy" singly in quasi-communal retirement.

What I observed is that the women weave old ways and folk beliefs into this emergent communal-household form entailing configurative, rather than passed down, culture to achieve positive personal as well as health outcomes. Through processes of interweaving, the women, living singly in retirement, seem to come to enjoy these old-upon-emergent cultural experiences. The elder women supplied five strategies for living happily:

- keeping the mind sharp,
- keeping the hands busy and the body active,
- employing anachronistic social skills to "fit in" within this new social form,
- maintaining social connectedness within and without the center, and
- employing secondary memorialization and material representation of memories.

This, then, is an ethnography exploring the women's cultural interweaving. Extant theoretical structure provides an integrative matrix for the observations herein described. I therefore borrow concepts from several disciplines in the literature review section that follows.

EXPLANATORY THEORY MATRIX

In the United States, becoming old can be a marginalizing process, eclipsing the cultural heritage and contribution of individual persons. With the rapid modification of formal living patterns, increasing numbers of elders are living in emergent household forms such as the quasi-communal settings of this study. I have borrowed the sociological/anthropological conception of configurative culture. It is this configurative culture element in which social forms are emerging rather than being passed on (Mead 1970) that begets adapting one's social strategies (Geerts et al. 1999) and social roles (Osgood 1982b) to fit the emergent community with its "shared symbols, territory, we feelings and social organization" (Ross 1977).

Turning to personal health status as a key to function, lay cognitive notions, and lived experiences (Myerhoff 1978, 1984; Williams 1983) of "healthy," of well-being, are generational social products. Individual beliefs related to well-being are moored within their cultural matrix (Nichter 1989) and the elders' social networks (Hilleras et al. 1999).

This sense of experienced well-being contrasts with the medical conception (Colantonio 1988) of health as an absence of disease, pain, and injury (Wright 1985). Health, thus conceived by the lay individual, is an active process that involves physical experience and self-comparison within one's present milieu. Health or what constitutes healthy, then, is historically and environmentally context specific (Das 1990).

Old ways are not limited to ritual behavior. In some cases, however, old ways fall within Victor Turner's (1986) conception of ritual. Performance, in these cases, consists of the women's scripted (structured) and singular (enacted by one individual) solipsistic rituals. These rituals are solipsistic because meaning is personally derived with recognized import only to the specific individual who experiences immediate continued well-being through the ritual performance.

Milieu-specific sociocultural and personal expectations can contribute to distinctive patterns of engagement that provide the experience of

healthy. The distinctive engagement activities defined above as old ways have behavioral “momentum” value in configurative cultural settings, in that old ways have persisted over time (Plaud, Plaud, and von Duvillard 1999) such that old ways themselves lend sustenance to behavioral responses within a known range. Thus, adaptation strategies that include old ways also serve in the conservation of lifestyle (Kemp 1988) within evolving social contexts.

The prosthetic feature for health maintenance and lifestyle, conservation of old ways, is supported by recent works of Rubinstein (1989), Rowles (1991), and others who have identified social, personal, and body-centered processes linking aged individuals to their home space. Included are cultural rules of domestic order (how furnishings are set forth separating task-specific activities—eating, sleeping, social), surveillance of one’s home space surroundings, the ordering and inventorying of objects, and relational attachment. Relational attachment is twofold (Myerhoff 1984; Small 1999; Rubinstein 1989) consisting of the objects selected as furnishings and the personal associations the arrangement of furnishings creates. These processes linking aged individuals to their home space have ontological precedents (Sapolsky 1996; Nelson 1988) in other mammalian species.

The recent work of anthropologist Jane Goodall, who has made a study of primates and primate behavior in natural surroundings, supports this view of these linkage processes as evolving (Goodall 1992; Jackson 1991; Kaufman 1986). The provision of a natural habitat that provides occupational opportunities indigenous to primate lifeways in the wild is found to encourage functional skills. Providing for the processes’ linking beings to home space sustains the necessary survival skills for maintaining “healthy well-being” and “social connectedness” among these animals (Goodall 1992; Jackson 1991; Sapolsky 1996) when relocated in captivity. This is particularly so with the aged and less able elder animals (Sapolsky 1996). Thus, I turn to some pertinent concepts from the literature on purposeful occupation in humans regarding the perception of and maintenance of personal well-being within a cultural matrix (Martin 1989; Osgood 1982a).

Human occupation can be simply put as “interaction with the environment—physical, social, cultural” (Kielhofner 1985). Components and determinants of human occupation can be cast within three subsystems that are hierarchically arranged to form an individual’s reception/action system (Kielhofner 1985) within an environmental context.

In this schematic model, then, human occupation is composed of three subsystems—volition, habituation, and performance—that are linked to and arise from a given individual's previous experience as bounded by the immediately existing surroundings, the occupational form, in which action is then taking place. The three subsystems, in turn, are grounded within the additional two factors of occupational form and past lived experience (Jacobs 1974).

The first personal subsystem, volition, depends on values held, choices available, and the means for personal causation. Values, choices, and agency are fundamentals influenced by culture and environment. That is, there is reciprocity between human action and context. Both human volition and the resulting activity affect culture because culture itself is a system, a system that undergirds the values held and choices made by individuals' providing momentum for behaviors enacted within environmental context.

The second subsystem of purposeful occupation I will label, conveniently, *habituation*. Current and prior social roles, habits, and performative knowledge bound habituation. In the explanatory models of Martin (1989) and Turner (1986), this domain of "embodied" knowledge, that which is known through habit and performance, need not be presently perceived as "knowledge" or cognitively understood to influence personal agency. Bourdieu (1982) and Connerton (1989) extend this element a step further in their conception of embodied culture as culture that is "known" through performance. For this study, however, I will limit meaning of habituation "knowledge" to experience knowledge arising from familiar past bodily actions, habits of behavior, sophisticated ritual that quiets the mind (Sorensen 1998), and enacted social roles (Myerhoff 1978, 1984).

The final personal subsystem, performance, hinges on the second. Expanding on embodied knowledge and its larger context of embodied culture, performance is conceptualized for this study as composed of subroutines of behavioral skills. Herein, human occupation, as interaction with one's environment, consists of volition, habituation, and skilled action (performance).

Occupational form (immediate surroundings), on the other hand, grounds the components of occupation arising within an individual's activity. Occupational form is the preexisting structure that elicits, guides, or structures the response (Altman 1975; Nelson 1988; Thrift and Williams 1987) occurring within a given space. Immediate surround-

ings affect the level of the individual's arousal and press (urgency of need) for a behavioral response (Nelson 1988) within the occupational form's range of appeal based on the individual actor's experience. Thus, a dynamic relationship exists between occupational form, including spatial relationships created by an elder within an area under personal control such as one's own apartment, and action undertaken. An occupational form thus created makes perceptual sense to the individual such that it may also serve in environmental totemism. Totemic meaning (Small 1999) within materially constructed home space includes a relatedness for an individual actor that extends beyond utilitarian uses alone (Allison 1991; Small 1999).

Occupational form is, therefore, significant in that individuals do create spatial relationships that make perceptual sense, and gain efficiency in spatial surroundings through familiarity with those furnishings in place (Altman 1975; Antonovsky 1979; Rubinstein 1989; Tambiah 1979). Creation and perception of occupational form thus narrows response selection so that actions are not simply random (Thrift and Williams 1987).

Also influencing perceptual meaningfulness and volition within given space (immediate surroundings) is the incentive for interpersonal connectedness. Engagement, or connectedness with its attendant sense of acceptance and esteem achieved through social connection, supplies core incentives to enter into social exchanges (Aronoff and Wilson 1985) within any age set. Connectedness melds the present, past experience, and the future (Hicks 1999) in the maintenance of many social links (Bassuk, Glass, and Berkman 1999). This melding, in turn, is bounded by a third factor consisting of derived behavioral norms within a set range of behavioral responses (Osgood 1982b) that are culture-driven covenants of traditional social behaviors (Jacobs 1974; Myerhoff 1978).

Thus, past, present, and future are mutually interactive (Martin 1998) within the context of the occupational form of the moment in configurative culture (Mead 1970) such as in the emergent elder household form under study. In this study, I examine elder women's purposeful occupation within a household arrangement that offers private apartments and a variety of activities, social gatherings, common meals, and other amenities in a college campus-like environment. The ethnography that follows illustrates the women's five strategies for "living happy" in this setting.

METHOD

I explored through participant observation the daily occupation of four elder women of middle-class means living in a quasi-communal campus-like setting housing only elders. I spent portions of days and nights with the four primary informants, varying the times and days of the week, staying with each of them, and observing the intimacies of their daily occupation over a period of six months. For the most part, the individual women did not relate to me as part of their daily undertakings. Occasionally, however, each offered comments. Comments, when related to another person, serve to formalize insights for the speaker. Comments also impart status through the sharing of wisdom gained over the course of a long life. I took field notes on these volunteered comments and added these to my daily recording of field observation data.

In addition, I lived briefly as a participant-observer, apartment dweller in a sister complex to the residence of my longer-term study participants above. I kept field notes of the inner workings of the larger community as a whole. Finally, I also conducted interviews separately with staff and, for validation, with twenty-two other elder single women of like social background residing in a number of other similar retirement community apartment campuses in the southwestern United States. Field notes, interviews, and structured preference sorts were then analyzed and set within the emergent elder themes for "living happy" in late life that arose from the research data.

The four elder women and all twenty-two additional interviewees were opportunistically selected with the aid of residence staff and the families of residents. All lived in quasi-communal retirement centers.

THE SETTING

Each center consisted of personal apartments with housekeeping services, communal dining, transportation services, and voluntary participation in a program of planned activities and events. The three-story apartment buildings were arranged in a horseshoe about a covered entrance, circular drive, well-kept lawns, and parking on the side projecting an appearance such as that of a small, midtown university campus. All the centers of this study were in urban areas with ready access to a hospital in the neighborhood. Each apartment opened onto a small

patio or a balcony, with an interior hall separating front from back apartments, so that this central corridor could be used in all weather to travel about the interior of the buildings. Each apartment contained a kitchen area with eating space, bedrooms, baths, large living room, and huge walk-in closets. Furnished guest quarters mirrored the apartments of residents and provided visitors with a choice of one or two bedroom quarters.

The center of study had age (elders only) and health restrictions. Independence was required on the part of residents in completing personal activities of daily living. Some centers, however, did provide additional services for the less able but moved those needing assisted care over an extended time frame to separate buildings or, if twenty-four-hour nursing care was needed, to associated nursing homes.

Because of the cost for meals, rent, and services provided to residents, these centers also effectively restricted the social class of residents to America's middle-class and above. Apartment residency included one or two meals a day served restaurant style in soft lighting about tables set for two to six persons. Dinner was ordered from the day's menu and served at cloth-covered tables attractively set with fine dinnerware and silver. In addition, a bar area was open at dinner one or two days a week. Other communal areas included a library, reserved dining room, study, billiards' room, beauty parlor, country store, grand lobby with flowering plants, a fountain, a fireplace, and relaxing seating. Off the lobby, rows and rows of personal mailboxes flanked two walls. Through the double doors was a heated pool on the back lawn just past a large covered patio. With residents living in apartments while engaging with others within a center's common areas for many "extended family-like" activities, the centers functioned similarly to college campus-living settings with the provision of similar administrative oversight.

THE COMMUNITY

The participants were four middle-class elder women, aged seventy-five to eighty-seven. All four women had resided at the center for more than eighteen months at the beginning of the study. Each woman described "having to get used to" this new retirement-setting living. All

had previously owned their own home and had lived at home until relocating to the retirement center. I will not elaborate on the decision-making processes leading each to move to the quasi-communal setting beyond stating that all were afraid of being dependent on family, believed they could not take care of a house and yard any longer, and wanted to retain some independence in their daily lives. All selected furnishings from their own homes to use in filling an apartment that was considerably smaller in size.

The women, while independent in routine activities of daily living, sometimes used adaptations or assistive devices during performance of these tasks. Two had a small pet and therefore had selected first-floor space for taking the cat or dog in and out. Two lived on the second floor, where one could look out yet be safe from anyone climbing over the low walls surrounding the grounds.

Three of the women were formerly married, their husbands' being deceased at the time of the study. These formerly married women all had children. One woman had never married. All four women had completed some education beyond high school graduation. Each had been employed during some portion of their lives. However, length, kind, and ages when employed outside of the context of homemaking varied considerably across the group of women studied.

ELDERS' OCCUPATION: "LIVING HAPPY" WITHIN ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Interestingly, although perhaps not surprisingly, given the women's common histo-cultural tradition, all four described, in one form or another, five basic components of living a happy life. These basic five components include

1. keeping the mind active,
2. keeping the body physically active and the hands busy,
3. deploying traditional social skills in order to fit in,
4. maintaining social connectedness, and
5. recalling memories or personal life history.

The four women who will lead us in discovery are designated Anne, Barbara, Catherine, and Dana. Each woman personalized and made her

own the means for living out these five basic components of a “good life” in one’s latter days. I shall examine the five strategies in the following ethnography.

KEEPING THE MIND ACTIVE

Turning first to “keeping the mind active,” the women cast a sound mind, necessary for reasoning and remembering, with maintenance of health in general. Thus, “an active mind” is a generational social product that signals continued good health to the women as they lived within the emergent cultural matrix of the Center. Speech was seen as of significant import in keeping the mind alive, thus creating a need (or press) for conversation. Conversation partners were sought out at dinner, at special events, and at the casual passing-by of others.

Surveillance, a process linking elders to their home space, takes in the area visible from window or patio.² Surveillance enables the women to find neighbors, staff, visitors, and others to engage in speech exchange. “I go out on the porch a great deal; I like to see people come and go,” said Anne. She watched and surveyed the scene passing by outside her apartment, greeting others coming up to pet her dog. “[We are] very, very close in here.” The dog aids the woman’s surveillance of the center neighborhood in a second way. Her dog alerts the woman to the passing of visitors and residents on the grounds. Anne can thus time her forays for perspective conversationalists at the most auspicious moments. “I don’t talk to myself. I talk to my dog,” said Anne. “Anyone over eighty ought to have a pet.” Giving value to speech in keeping one’s mind active also involves volition and deliberative choice in the women’s present surroundings. Barbara selects a table for four at each meal. A table of four gives her a choice of conversation partners. One time a week, “because that is as often as it takes [to catch up on the latest gossip at the Center],” Barbara gets up early to wander among the many residents eating breakfast, listening and commenting to individuals chatting in groups.

A calendar page served as an aid for long-range memory and planning of activities by the month. To jog her short-term remembering in accord with keeping the mind active, Catherine set a vase in the middle of the floor, explaining that an out-of-place object reminds her of tasks yet to be done. At this juncture, the item out of place reminds her that the cat is tethered on the back patio. Letting the cat back inside, she returned

the vase to its rightful place. While getting dressed, Catherine set a bottle of face cream on the bedroom floor to remind her to push the house page button (if not pushed once every twenty-four hours, the house staff comes to check). "Her mind going" through failure to remember might create a question as to her health in general and to her ability to continue to live independently in residency at the center.

A file of crossword puzzles, a dictionary, and a thesaurus are kept by Barbara's favorite chair to challenge her mind with purposeful occupation during the in-between activities of her day.

My memory is getting holes in it. I think it helps to keep it in shape doing puzzles. Words that have been in my memory for years are just gone when I reach for them. It's frightening. I just hate that.

Anne shared her passion for "seeing new things" through educational travel. "I take tours," Anne said while noting that she was now past eighty. When Anne fell while on vacation last year, tour staff quickly volunteered to push her in a wheelchair so that Anne "didn't miss a thing." Dana used TV viewing to keep current on news, holiday events, sociocultural trends, and the latest celebrity scandals. But Dana also liked silence at times: "not sound around all the time" to detract from one's own thoughts. Anne watched sports, especially baseball, cheering the players on out loud. Anne also loved watching politics and political speeches as she argued her views on the topic right along with the candidates.

Both sound and silence can calm the active mind. For instance, when completing tasks about her apartment, Anne indicated, "I've always got music on—classics." In contrast, at times, Catherine found the absence of sound to be an aid to keeping the mind active: "I'm easily distracted these days [her latter years]," said Catherine, as she honed her mental focus by driving her car in silence until we reached the auto repair shop.

Pacing was important: quiet, then noise; activity, then rest; social exchange, then singular pastimes one could complete alone. Two of the four women never scheduled more than one extra activity per day³: enough of the less common to stimulate but not to overtax and thus weaken "the active mind." When trying to do too many things earlier, Dana said that she had "burnt the soup on the stove setting off the fire alarm," whereupon staff rushed into her apartment. "I have done this

before—forgot. Maybe I should give up cooking altogether” to avoid the perception of her health as deteriorating because her “mind was [seemingly] going.”

All four women believed newspapers as well as planned and deliberative social interactions keep “the mind active” with knowledge of current events. Some read parts of the paper because “I can’t bring myself to read the details of (bad) things in the news.” Barbara read two papers a day, the local paper and the national paper her son worked for. All read the obituaries to keep track of the passing of friends and associates “because the post office no longer returns cards marked deceased.” Keeping track of the status of one’s associations was important for social comparison of how well one’s self was doing. In keeping up on current events, an envelope to be mailed might have been set at the front door preparatory for and as justification for a daily trip to the mailboxes. Because the mailboxes functioned as a social gathering and gossip-exchange places, it was important to survey them regularly “to keep up socially” even when not expecting to receive mail.

Aids to help “the mind to stay sharp” included setting up one’s pill box for the week by the day of the week and times of the day medications needed to be taken so that one could tell immediately if one had forgotten. Lists were made to aid memory and guide one skillfully through the day. In the hallway beside each apartment door was a tiny shelf for individually created whimsies to be set on display. These created-whimsies afforded instant recognition when returning home lest one be thought lost, confused, or otherwise not in control of one’s mind by walking right past one’s own entrance. A rosary, tucked under the pillow daily after use, served as reminder to pray each day because Barbara’s prayers “obtained many miracles for family and friends.” Each time Dana left her apartment, she took a small purse and her keys from a hook at the front door. Returning, she carefully replaced the purse that held her “daily” ironed cloth hankie, some change, and her keys. “Your mind you can control. Being healthy is in the body and the mind,” Barbara said as she indicated a fellow lady resident passing by. “She dresses lovely, but you can’t talk to her about anything. She’ll make a face and talk of her pains. It is all in her head.” Here, Barbara emphasized the need to control “the focus of one’s mind” as she contrasted herself as still being in control of her mind and, therefore, “still healthy.”

KEEPING THE HANDS BUSY AND THE BODY ACTIVE

Turning here to the second strategy of keeping the hands busy and the body active, observations of health-keeping undertakings were many. Taking out a small portable ironing board and making room for it on her dresser top, the elder woman began steam ironing. Dana ironed her lace-edged handkerchiefs herself. Weaving old ways into the present cultural context, she carried one cloth hankie in her purse every day. "My mother never had idle hands," Dana mused to herself. Looking at the hand-wrought lacy edging of a hankie she was ironing, she elaborated,

My mother never sat down without something to do in her hands. We [girls of her day—about 1915] were expected to learn how to embroider, to do embroidery. We embroidered and tatted handkerchiefs and other things . . . something to do with one's hands.

Just recently, in adhering to the premise of "keeping the hands busy," Dana has begun quilting. This she did on her lap, selecting and creating patterns, cutting pieces to fit, and sewing by hand. "[Some] people watch TV with their mouths drooped open and not accomplishing anything more than that in an evening. Handiwork, handiwork accomplishes something. You have something to show for it." Her quilts are given as wedding presents to her grandchildren, handing down a tradition of fine handiwork while maintaining family ties as well.

Sitting on her daybed, Dana matches and rolls up her stockings, tucking these in a drawer. At a small antique desk, she inventories, sorts, and then restores her pin drawer to its place. Preparing a snack lunch, china dishes, and coffee cups, now full, are carried to the living room and set on a small fold-down, cherry serving table. After eating a little something before taking medication, Dana carries the dishes to the sink. Washing dishes is followed by making iced tea, but here, Dana returns the ice trays to the freezer empty. On a prior day, she had forgotten a pan on the stove. Despite some lapses such as these, Dana is busy and active each day, socializing at a craft group in which she learns new ways to "keep the hands busy."

"I had hobbies," reports Catherine who still displays some of her decorative needlework. She can no longer control a fine needle, but Catherine continues to do volunteer work. "Before [moving here], I was

a volunteer at court. I had authority.” Today she takes a weekly turn in the center store that sells small handmade gifts, carries books for trading, and stocks a few sundries for resale. “To do, to be independent” was an important theme in the women’s pursuit of purposeful occupation each day. “I have my independence [here at my retirement center apartment]. I can come and go.” Anne observed that “living at the center, [she] was not being a burden to family”; although she is not “dependent,” she has less responsibility than when keeping up her own home.

Collecting her mending, Anne commented to no one in particular as she looked out the window: “At least, it keeps my fingers a little nimble.” Standing on the patio while her dog was “busy being good,” Anne watched for passersby, hopeful for conversation, while she also kept track of whose children were visiting that afternoon. Returning, Anne set up her ironing board, sprinkling bottle to dampen clothes, and her iron. Anne took out her washed cotton sheets and ironed them. To get a good night’s sleep, Anne believed one had to have cotton on the bed. Cotton sheets breath with the sleeper. “It is comforting to do daily tasks in my own time,” Anne mused as she continued to the bedroom where she made up her bed with ironed cotton sheets. “I do like to get some movement in me, some exercise. I like to do my bed—strip it and make it.” Stripping and making the bed is something the staff generally does weekly after washing and returning towels and no-iron fitted bed sheets. Anne, however, equates “doing” with health. Anne irons cotton sheets and makes her bed herself in a singular ritual that lets her immediately experience her continuing health through this solipsistic ritual performance.

Pacing is a part of being able to still do things for one’s self. “This is how I do things. I work and I rest.” Anne returns to standing at the ironing board and cuts and irons out the hem of a dress. She sews the raw edge sitting at her sewing machine. Returning to her ironing board, Anne folds, pins, and irons in the hem as she goes. When she is up, Anne has knee pain, so she returns to sitting. Seated, Anne threads and knots a needle and deftly stitches up the hem of her new skirt. “My knee is not going to stop me. . . . It slows me down, and I haven’t gotten used to it yet. . . . Some of the residents here won’t do any chores.” Again equating doing with health, Anne continues, “Keeping up with chores is living. Some just sit and don’t know what to do with themselves during the day. I keep busy. I don’t want to give in to it [her leg pain]” because “giving in” signals that “the mind is not in control.” “I do everything I can.”

Anne irons a tablecloth and puts it on the small round kitchen table. Searching through the cupboards, Anne sets out china plates, silver, and glasses. At the sink, she makes egg salad and samples her sandwich from her china plate. For Anne, this is the way it is always done, eating off of china plates and a cloth table cover.

Usually, I keep pretty busy. I don't get bored, that's for sure. I don't have time for that. I don't especially like ironing. [But] if I give up all my little household chores, then I could be bored. [Doing a chore] gives me exercise.

Doing chores provides Anne with immediate performative knowledge of her state of continued well-being as illustrated by her comments that follow.

I don't need someone to do this for me now. If I can't see or hear, I may hire someone then. . . . [Not doing, not performing] is the biggest thing [difficulty] for elderly people. If it wasn't for this bum knee, I would have everything [all her daily chores] done already [before lunch].

Eyes periodically closed, Anne wakes and sleeps intermittently for the next two hours. Then, it is up again with the dog to the patio, while surveying "her neighborhood" in front of her apartment building. "Sometimes with the activities here, I feel old. . . . I like to go away from here with friends. TV doesn't keep me in," Anne comments, gazing across a sea of carefully kept grass.

I'm still traveling . . . since recuperating from a fall. [I take] shorter trips. . . . I'll say OK no more traveling; that's the end of it. I don't know when that day will come [when I am unable to go touring] though, because there's still too much to do.

Anne is up now and circling her apartment, room by room, turning on music boxes (she knows the tune of each one), singing, and pointing out this one and that one. Each has a history, as a gift or as a souvenir from her travels. "Sometimes, I have them all going at once," Anne states as though she is recalling travel excursions from her past. "I can't go far. It [her knee] begins to hurt. So I use a cane [taking up one now] when I go all around [my apartment]."

Getting out of bed in the morning, Catherine begins her day with her isometric exercises. Next, she fixes up a bag of laundry soap from a large box in the kitchen. Going out into the hall and across the way, Catherine puts her clothes in the washer. Returning, Catherine sets a vase from the table on the floor, to remind her to get her things out of the dryer. After resting in her favorite chair while doing crossword puzzles, Catherine puts on a musical tape to practice her line dancing so that her performance will look polished at her dance class that evening.

"I stay real busy, real busy." Barbara said thoughtfully, "I consider myself one of the luckiest people. Many never leave their apartment except to eat." Management actively recruits couples, Barbara explains, so "that it won't look like a home just for little old ladies." In keeping with this marketing strategy of not looking like a nursing home, the center's residency rules require that all residents must be able to get to a dining table on their own power (without assistive appliances) in the communal dining area where all meals are served restaurant style. One can walk the hallways with a walker, provided one can leave the walker at the door and walk unaided the rest of the way to a seat at one of the dining tables inside.

One woman neighbor was limited to eating in her apartment because she could not make that distance necessary to sit at a table. She ate in her apartment so that "she would not stick out like a sore thumb [looking old, ill, and unable] using a walker in the dining hall," Catherine advised. She saw appearing fit as being a part of being healthy. In addition to her personal desire to appear attractive and fit, Catherine also took note of the restrictive rules of the center. The desire to personally appear as healthy, coupled with the threat of being forced to move from one's independent-living apartment if one were not fit, created a need (or press) for performing *as* healthy. "When people ask 'How are you?' I just automatically say 'fine.' People are not really interested in organ recitals," Dana observes with humor as she too indicated the need for maintaining a "healthy" appearance "by keeping active."

"FITTING IN" WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CONFIGURATIVE CULTURE

"Fitting in" is an important theme in the lives of these women. All reported it took a them a year or more to "get use to it [this quasi-

communal household arrangement]”—to “fit in.” “You can wait too long to move to a retirement home. You should do it when you can [still] get used to it,” stated Anne. Fitting in called for anachronistic social skills and a conception of woman as lady. Social exchange reminiscent of the women’s youth prevails. “Those men you met at the elevator. . . . They are such flirts. It’s fun. We flirt right back,” said Barbara.

Dinner and visiting with others in the dining room may take as long as two hours. Anne indicates that she always tries to go to dinner: “Otherwise, the nights are too long and unfilled.” “All the women I’ve seen here dress for dinner,” observes Anne. Because of constant knee pain when standing or walking, Anne wears a black leg brace. “[But] I will not wear it for dress-up. I will give in to vanity.” Thus, here, it can be seen that being pain free lost out to correct social attire for a lady, in that, as Anne went on to confide, “that [the brace] sure makes a difference [in less pain].” On occasion, Catherine wears a cervical collar due to intermittent neck pain. But cognizant like Anne of proper sociocultural expectations in her current living context, Catherine took the collar off before darting across the hall to the washing machines. Catherine avoided being seen because “I’m not dressed [she was wearing slacks for doing chores] to go down there and be seen by people.”

Catherine talks, as had Anne, of looking good: “I always look and feel better with makeup on,” Catherine exclaimed as she hurried down the halls to pick up her laundry with her hair in curlers. “It’s against the rules to be in the hall with curlers in your hair. . . . Older men may only pretend to be liberal,” Catherine advises in indicating that older men still expect women to dress up, to be pretty.

Similarly, Barbara, surveying her clothes closet prior to dinner, selected a dress and matching shoes, polished her nails, and then filled a small purse with necessary items. Then, concluding her ritual with retouching her makeup, Barbara went out the door and down the halls to the center’s finely appointed dining room. She explained,

You can tell the guests at dinner. They wear scruffy clothes, jeans, cut-offs. These younger people have different standards. They won’t dress for dinner. They don’t believe in dressing for dinner. I like to always look good. If my shape collapses with age, my vanity may stop.

Catherine attended to “dressing up” whether going to the center library, to the mailbox in the lobby, to a center activity, to the store, or to dinner. Even spending an evening quietly alone involved attention to

dressing up. After partaking of before-dinner cocktails, dinner, and after-dinner socializing at the table, Catherine returned to her apartment alone. Entering her clothes closet, she selected a long cotton robe from her “dress robe collection”—dressing up for a quiet evening alone. Catherine relates dressing up to social class:

The upper class starts trends. The upper class can't be undistinguished. The rich always want to distinguish themselves. Since cotton requires ironing and the rich have the means to have others iron for them, cotton has come to be “in” again. I don't like all the ironing myself.

Going to the grocery store is also a social event that calls for proper attire for a lady. Ladies dress up for shopping, wearing skirts or dresses and high-heeled sandals or dress shoes. Meeting and getting on the van, all leave together from the center lobby. Each shops quickly. Then, the well-dressed shoppers gather at the front of the store to visit while sitting on the benches at Smith's Grocery. Dana states, “It is hard giving up driving and [leisurely shopping] doing things quickly and on someone else's schedule. I can't just pick up and go any more.” But, for today, she has successfully managed dressing up and hurried shopping, leaving time for visiting at the end to “fit in” at this particular social occasion.

That afternoon, Catherine begins dressing for a newcomer tea, putting on a striking dress and shoes of the same color. This affair is formal, with men wearing ties and ladies wearing corsages. The affair is reminiscent of the past, a past that included formal dances in which women pinned flowers in their hair and carried a dance program on which men signed up for dances with the ladies of their choice, and in which conversation was expected to hold a charming flair. “This is my time to do my social duty,” to maintain her social connectedness within the center community. To “do my social duty” is a thought that harkens to days when social graces and duty had prominent place in American society. Catherine looked relieved to escape the final moments of the tea where waiters served the ever-chattering guests. “I am not a great mixer or joiner,” she confided, as she continued on to the center store. Here, again, she would “do her social duty” and staff the store sales' counter. The store was her “volunteer participation,” her duty of two hours work to the extended family-like community of the center—the sociocultural set where she now lived.

Later, dressing for dinner also set the stage for attention to be given to chatting with other diners. “I avoid the mob. But I may sit for an hour

after dinner. I like to vary the group I sit with. I'm not competitive [enough to stake out the same table-place every day]," said Catherine. At home again, having coffee also involved certain socioculture traditions of a bygone era. China coffee cups she received as wedding gifts more than half a century ago are attractively arranged by Dana on a decorative tray with silver spoons and cloth napkins. Carrying these to the table, Dana observes to no one in particular: "It is harder today. There is not enough promise of improvement today."

Knowing the traditional old ways and the social exchange norms in the configurative culture of the Center allows the women to "fit in." "Fitting in" facilitates personal health in providing incentive, even obligation, to complete a variety of activities. "Fitting in" was, as well, a means to meet one's social/emotional needs. Thus, "fitting in" also correlates back to the women's lifeway themes of keeping the mind active and the body moving.

MAINTAINING SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

The fourth aspect of living healthy, according to my elder participants, I have labeled *social connectedness*. Social connectedness, as used here, is more inclusive than just skills. Social connectedness refers to maintaining connections to one's family, friends, and culture—connections to one's place in the world. The women deliberately pursued these elements that situated each within space: geographic space, space in time, and space as place in the family line between ancestors and heirs in the individual pursuit of histo-social space for themselves as persons. "I am trying to get used to not being in a family setting," stated Barbara, a Center resident for eighteen months. Taking out her daughter's dissertation, Catherine read out loud: "[There is a] 25 percent incident rate of mental health problems with older persons in America." Having thus established herself as interested in "scholarly" ideas, Catherine offered her own view of the cause of this high rate of mental health problems in elder women: "Families are neglecting older people, where they didn't used to."

Catherine keeps a Siamese cat, a gift from her daughter. She talks to and plays with her cat off and on during the day. And every evening, when Catherine sat down in her "television chair," the cat would jump up into her lap while the elder woman "rolled" him with a lint roller.

Catherine indicated that this makes the cat feel just like when he was a kitten and the mother cat licked his fur to clean him up. "I was more lonesome before I got the cat." Caring for her pet appears to tap Catherine's prior family role as nurturer of skinned knees, children, and the lost, while the cat himself, given as a gift, is a connection to Catherine's own daughter.

When Dana moved from a townhouse to this smaller space, she gave away many furnishings to "her kids. . . . [It is] nice to see these things being used." "These things being used" is an important connection to family. By "being used," these heirlooms retain a life of their own, continuing Dana's place within her family line after her own death. "I feel sorry for those here with no family close by," Dana said, because "family substantiates and increases the self." Dana, keeping a portable phone by her antique couch in the living room, easily chatted with relatives, making plans for a family outing. Dana pointed out how the couch could be conscripted for family visits and "used as a bed for one overnight guest." Anne indicated, "It's little things like birthday cards" that keep up connections with family members. "Write cards, and before you know it, you know them all [names of extended family members]." And last year, Anne renewed family ties in person, visiting all of her grandnieces and grandnephews.

MATERIAL MEMORIES SERVE AS TIES TO SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Objects serve as material memories. Objects can express something of the uniqueness and importance of the individual recognized by others. Display allows the elder to affirm, through these material artifacts, social connectedness while recalling her own history. "I love music boxes," said Anne who had, as described above, spun through her apartment turning all the music boxes on at once while sharing the history that these treasured objects brought to mind.

I got my first one [music box] at thirteen. From then on, I started collecting. Others began sending them to me as gifts. [Some are] souvenirs of my travels. [The music boxes] represent something special about me.

In a similar fashion, Dana shared something of her history in pointing out her collection of cows—statues, dolls, a flower pot, a pitcher—all

cow figurines. "I have never touched a cow and have nothing to do with cows," Dana laughed. But others who gave her, and still give her, cow-shaped items of every description are recognizing through this gifting of cow figurines her individual uniqueness. The figurines, in keeping with the treasures that they are, reside in a lighted, glass-front oak cabinet probably as "antique" as Dana herself. Just now, she sits quietly on her antique couch and gazes out the window in surveying "her center neighborhood," as a van pulls up and several young people tumble out.

Barbara prayed with her sister daily when the sister had still been "able to remember." Suddenly, Barbara looked up and handed me a rosary, indicating that two people praying is better than one. Prayer serves in God and family connectedness for Barbara. Family members still call to ask for Grandmother's prayers. "I know what it is [that has family still calling for prayers]. It is a miracle."

Barbara has six children and fourteen grandchildren. Material memories help her remember important details. Barbara takes out her "grandmother's charm bracelet" with a charm she has added for each grandchild. The charms help her recall birthdays and names so that she is still able to send timely cards to these, her descendents. When some of these grandchildren were scheduled to visit, she kept watch for them in the surveillance zone visible through her second floor window that opens onto the front lawn. After the grandchildren's visit, Barbara inventoried each curio and then carefully returned each material memory to its proper place in her home.

Keeping up a varied schedule, including family, old neighborhood friends, volunteer organizations, and now retirement center events, gives Barbara multiple layers of social connectedness. Barbara has a canasta group that has met for "too many years to count," which she is entertaining today by having the group as her guests for dessert in the center's dining room, followed by card playing. Barbara also continues her connectedness to her prior community by taking part in the old neighborhood bridge group. The telephone rings, and Barbara chats with friends, making plans to attend a charity she has belonged to since her children were tiny. Barbara laments that at this moment in history, "the number of women working, young women, has changed the complexion of volunteer groups. There is no one to lead. The younger women that would be good have full-time jobs."

Keeping track of the passage of personal history makes reading the “obits” a daily ritual. “Otherwise, I might not know [of a friend’s passing],” says Anne. “It is different today,” notes Catherine in a like vein. “There is less community interest [outside of the individual family], nowadays. More are out for themselves.”

Barbara no longer drives, but she keeps her car at the center for weekly trips with her housekeeper to visit long-frequented business proprietors from her former neighborhood. “I don’t want my children to have to take care of me. Here, the center assumes some responsibility for me”; yet, Barbara has found one more way to hold onto some of her old neighborhood connections.

Walking the halls daily, the woman ends at the first floor rows of Center mailboxes. Most important on this particular date is pinning on the bulletin board to share with her “Center household” one of her son’s photos of breaking news that Barbara has carefully cut from that day’s national newspaper, a further mark of her social connectedness and of her histo-familial place within and without the Center “family.”

Material Memories: Objects Serve Recall, Totemic Functions

In her apartment, Barbara surrounds herself with meaningful things, selected from the many things she used to possess. Barbara’s favorite remaining furnishings in her apartment are her six antique needlepoint dining-table chairs. Each of Barbara’s six children will receive one chair after her death, thus preserving, through gifting to her children, her hand-wrought artwork. More important, however, each household will then hold great grandmother’s chair, thereby materially preserving, in totemic fashion (Small 1999), her space, her place, within the family line.

Dana keeps up family ties and material memories as the current caretaker of the “family hankie,” a ceremonial object ringed with hand-made tatting lace that has been carried by several generations of brides. Fine hand-wrought clothwork the woman remembers as “valued in the past.” This family also has a ceremonial tablecloth that is reported to be so large that several people have to help in the ironing of it. “Handiwork accomplishes something. Quilts are all the rage, nowadays,” says Dana who is making one quilt for each grandchild. “There

are more diversified roles for men and women today . . . [but handiwork], handiwork accomplishes something." Handiwork is, for Dana, a present and future material connection to her descendents. The Center itself pays honor to heirloom-creating by its elder tenants through staging memorabilia parties in which individual residents bring and share their material memories with others.

"I used to entertain a lot," Anne indicates. "Sometimes for a month at a time. I used to set aside a day and cook when I had my own home. I enjoyed it. [Here], I've gotten out of it." But for today, old time tunes are being played on the piano as the center serves a formal (traditional) tea, serving prepared dainties on a sideboard table on which tea is poured from a silver tea service. Cloth napkins, tiny sandwiches, and fancy bite-sized cakes adorn the table. Thus, the elder women are able to enact (perform) their traditional culture by still entertaining their neighbors in a formal fashion for a brief moment in time in their present living setting.

The phone rings, and Dana speaks with one of her children to select a restaurant for the weekly family dining out in formal fashion. Wednesday dining out "to save the housewives some work" has been a family undertaking for the past thirty years. At first, the weekly Wednesday formal dinners out were limited to just husband and wife. But as Dana's children grew up, they would come from their own homes and join the Wednesday dining out. "It's the only way we could be sure to see each other. We can get so busy." In time, the grandchildren and nieces and nephews also began joining in, each bringing along their best "date" so that boyfriends and girlfriends and romances were added to the family gathering. There are "so many things that separate different generations, every generation," that the family dining out is for Dana an important way to continue to participate in family history in the making. Then again, "It's marvelous how many things from my generation we still have [within the family]. [Still I] am always a little sad when my children have come and gone," she reminisced. "But, they have things of their own to do also."

Inventorying the furnishings in her apartment, Dana relayed the histories of some: a tall, wood-framed mirror that she had played dolls in front of as a small girl, and "see that silver dish—a wedding present to my parents. But I treasure that." Dana has told her children as relates to any of the material memories filling her living space:

Anything [that I am still using] you have your eye on that you like, just put your name on it. I have a book listing my things, and they register in that. But I feel lucky that they want it. . . . Some [people's children] don't want to be bothered. . . . I take pleasure knowing that my children [or grandchildren] want them.

These heirlooms of hers, wanted by her children, will serve to preserve her place in family histo-memory.

Dana's now deceased husband had worked with wood as a hobby. "I have a stool that he made. [He] made stools for new babies. [He] made stools for his graduate students. At the Center, I met a woman who had one of his stools." The heirloom value and the material memory value of the simple handcrafted wooden stool was defined in Dana's final statement as she gazed about her living room inventorying her possessions. "[His stools] became sort of an identification, a hallmark for my husband . . . these stools." The descent value of family treasures and their social connectedness value may be due to these treasures' ability to preserve the place of their current senior owners by serving as material memories, markers of family history within the homes of future generations. However, some material objects also seem to have an affirmation of social roles value for an elder woman who "does not work outside of her own home" in a new era when there are new and "more diversified roles for females." The stool as "an identification" of her husband's uniqueness as an individual preserves his place in her material world as it also preserves her social roles of wife and mother. In just this way, the wooden stool made by her husband serves in the process of secondarily memorializing him, a memorial not at his gravesite but right there within her own home.

Material Objects Also Call to Mind Individual Life Histories

Concluding the fifth basic component these elder women of a common histo-cultural tradition described in living a happy life in old age, I turn to material memories and personal life history recall. The element of memories as detailed within material objects can aid recall, aid storytelling, and serve in the preservation of social connectedness as I have illustrated above. However, in being on display, these collected material memories also offer opportunities to recall and even to share one's

history with guests. Barbara muses, "Oh, I look back, and there's a lot of good memories, and I'm glad I have them." Barbara has kept memorabilia that record family history. Barbara has baby books holding the history of each of her children. She has also preserved her own personal story as a young girl growing up nearly a century ago in a memory book containing dance programs (fellows always filled up her program with dance requests) from river boat parties. "I danced my legs off at all those dances." Barbara has saved souvenirs of dates, news clippings, memorable sayings, dried flowers, now-flattened bows, and even dried cigarettes once belonging to favored high school football players. About her apartment are other items of family history, including an old shaving mug first used by her husband, a lapidary cross in which each stone has a symbolic import, and a china box, a gift from one of her sons.

Similarly, Anne states, "I like my own things," indicating her music boxes and four-poster bed through the doorway. The process of selecting objects to keep in the apartment's smaller space is important because "furnishings have legends and special meaning" as that accorded to a scrapbook picture of a railroad train by Anne. Remembering is part and parcel of Anne's day, adding meaning to the ordinary that sustains her lively interest in life. "Pictures in my mind are better [than photographs]," but "telling your experience is best. [In the] olden days, family rode on trains," but "people are in too much of a hurry today for trains and looking out windows," while gathering in memories. Anne's table is set for a guest; each place has a distinctive pattern on the plate set out. "I am eating off my Bavarian dish [a memento of one of her travels]"; the other plate is "my Heidelberg dish." A music box is set to playing and humming in tune while awaiting her guest; Anne watches the musical carousel on her spinning music box that turns while tiny doors open and close on wee hidden bins. In a bygone culture, a "young lady" had a precious jeweled pin or ring tucked away for safekeeping in each pocket.

CONCLUSION AND POSSIBILITIES

Preservation of material memories and old ways within life-transitions of the elder women contributed to their "living happy" through their later life. The artifacts that hold these life memories and the symbolic meanings given to those artifacts contribute to the women's preser-

vation of a sense of self through time and aid in the performance of popular culture anachronisms in the present. Material memories and old ways are features of a culture-past, lived out in a present-day quasi-communal retirement center, a configurative culture in the making.

The women's five coping strategies may have decisive health consequences in undergirding individual competencies, thereby enhancing successful adaptation to life changes incumbent on living to an old age anywhere. The women's old ways compelled social involvement and continued performance of daily-life skills by serving a prosthetic-like role. Old ways and material memories aid in the continuing re-creation of linkage processes that allow the women to organize and to connect to their home space even within changing household forms, while sustaining a sense of self through time by recalling to mind one's own life history.

Some ethnographic examples of culturally derived lay notions of health and purposeful occupation, as well as strategies for histo-social adaptations, were gleaned from this research. The women's own words support the postulate that purposeful activity and engagement in social connectedness are bounded by cultural expectations, old ways the elder women interwove with traditional covenants of social behaviors, and personal memories materially represented in heirloom artifacts.

Among the elders in this quasi-communal retirement culture of study, known values and traditions of the past were preserved through furnishings, setting, quotidian activities, and social interaction styles. Heirloom artifacts gifted to descendents extended each elder woman's place within the life histories of families, even as these family histories extended into a future not yet manifest. Performance of solipsistic singular rituals of meaning to the individual only provided each woman the immediate self-appraisal necessary to gage the status of her own personal adaptability and well-being.

Further observation and study of elder women's occupation strategies and the resulting health outcomes is needed as the population of the United States continues to age. U.S. health care traditionally deletes the personal and the familiar as it privileges sanitary and uncluttered "nursing space" in care facilities such as nursing homes, hospitals, and assisted-living quarters, so that little to no space is available for singular ritual performances or for display of heirloom artifacts that aid elders to connect to place and to personal histories within changed living settings.

At the same time, medical care within these contexts all too frequently overrides familiar old ways and the more traditional social covenants often employed by elder persons. Yet, each one of these elements may be important, even critical, for adaptation, purposeful occupation, meaningfulness, anxiety reduction, and health maintenance for frail elder women coming to reside in hospitals, nursing homes, retirement communities, or even the homes of younger family members.

NOTES

1. In his memory, this study is dedicated to Robert L. Netting, anthropologist, professor, gentle man, whose research in ecology and household forms inspired my work and the work of many scholars.

2. The works of Rowles (1991) and Rubinstein (1989) identify and discuss surveillance as a process linking elders to their home surroundings, while Sapolsky's (1996) article illustrates that surveillance of home territory is a process common to elder primates.

3. The works of Jacobs (1974) and Osgood (1982b) give an overview of active and passive personalities and retirement-community participation.

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